

Scrutiny Review of Cost of Living Response and School Uniform Action Plan

Briefing Note November 2025

This briefing note provides an overview of the key projects undertaken by the FSOT & CE team, in partnership with other Council teams and external stakeholders, since the previous update to the People Select Committee in May 2025.

1.0 School uniform distribution

Over the last two summers, the FSOT team has coordinated a preloved school uniform donation across the Borough. Hundreds of good quality items have been donated for distribution to families at the Council's Summer Here to Help Events.

In the months leading up to the event, school uniform collection points were set up across libraries, Tees Active venues and SBC buildings. For 2025, people were asked to donate non-branded uniforms to make it easier to match these items to those in need. People were also invited to add a cheap supermarket uniform item to their shopping as a donation and this proved successful as the amount of new items donated increased this year.

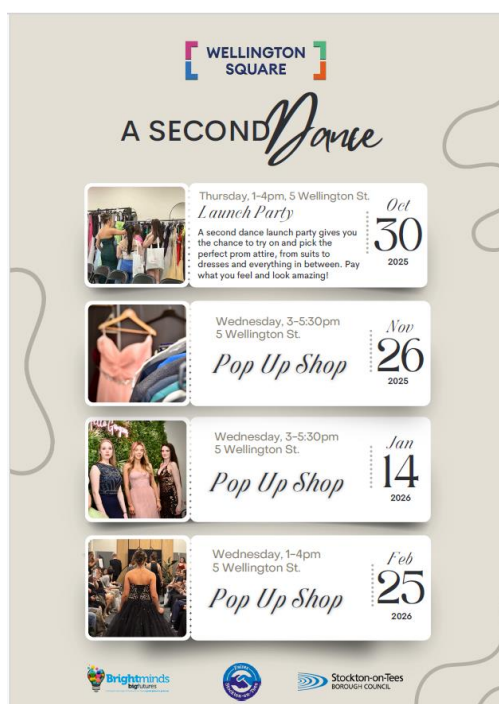
These events continue to be a successful way to provide uniform, with around 700 items of school uniform being collected by families at this year's event on 19th July.

One parent told us that she always struggles to get trousers to fit her son because he's big for his age and we found 3-4 pairs of trousers. She was 'over the moon' because it was going to save her lots of money.

A young girl whose mum didn't speak English as her first language was translating for her mum. We managed to get trousers and shirts for the girl and her brother. The girl and her mum were so happy and grateful.

The FSOT & CE team have worked in partnership with Thirteen Housing to distribute remaining uniforms via small pop-ups during the summer holidays. Staff have also fulfilled several individual requests via professionals working with families. However, this has been quite labour intensive, and a more efficient model is required. Officers are currently working with staff at the Council's Family Hubs to develop a project ensuring uniform provision across all four hubs. Existing stock, left over from the summer collection, would be shared out to the hubs, giving the chance to tailor the offer to the schools in that area. Families and/or professionals could then call into their local hub when they need uniform.





4.0 Family Action Supporting Families Fund

The FSOT has worked with Family Action to secure £2000 from the Banks Group to create a 'Supporting Families Fund'.

The fund has already provided crucial support to families in need as the case studies (attached as appendix 1) demonstrate.

5.0 School Uniform Policy Letters to Schools

As previously updated, letters have been issued, on behalf of the People Select Committee, to all schools in the Borough, advising them to update their school uniform policies. A low number of responses was received to these letters. Many schools have updated their uniform policies to make them more affordable for families. However, affordability remains a key concern for parents, hence the continued necessity for the work outlined in this report.

6.0 Free School Meals Auto-Enrolment Phase 2

Following a successful pilot project, with over 300 pupils auto-enrolled, phase 2 of the Council's free school meal auto-enrolment commenced in July 2025. Led by the FSOT team, staff across the Council have supported this project to ensure as many entitled pupils as possible are enrolled for free school meals. Data matching and inputting was completed before the start of the new academic year in September. Officers also continued to work with schools that input their own free school meals claims to provide accurate information and respond to any queries on this project. A final figure for the number of pupils enrolled during phase two of this project will be provided following the closure of the Autumn Census 2025.

In addition, due to the success of the SBC auto-enrolment pilot project, the Local Government Association requested for an SBC representative to present at an online webinar on free school meals auto-enrolment in July 2025. A link to the webinar recording and blog can be accessed here: <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/social-care-health-and-integration/what-now-fsm-registrations-role-local-councils-driving>

Appendix 1 – Family Action Supporting Families Fund Case Studies

Case Study 1: Supporting a Young Family Facing Medical Challenges

A young family, recently relocated to the area from India, due to the father's company-sponsored work placement. Following a critical medical emergency, where the family's three-month baby stopped breathing, resulting in an urgent hospital visit, the family were provided with a baby sleep monitor. This device, placed under the cot mattress, will alert the mother if the baby stops breathing during sleep. The monitor has offered both practical and emotional support, allowing the mother to rest more easily and reduce her anxiety. This in turn, has supported her to care for her other children.

Additionally, she has accessed support through a Family Action befriending volunteer, who helped her register at the local library and connect with baby and toddler groups at the family hub and in the wider community. This has reduced the family's social isolation, helped her build friendships, and established a local support network. Her 3-year-old daughter now regularly attends these groups, where she interacts with children her age and has made significant progress in her English-speaking skills, boosting her confidence and supporting her early development.

Case Study 2: Creating Stability for a Survivor of Human Trafficking and Her Son

XXX is a 4-year-old boy who has already experienced significant trauma and instability in his early years. XXX is currently non-verbal and believed to be deaf. He is undergoing assessments to better understand his needs. His mother is a survivor of human trafficking, and together they have faced multiple relocations and periods of homelessness. Most recently, they were forced to leave their previous accommodation when the landlord unexpectedly ended the tenancy, leaving them without a home and with very few possessions.

They have now moved into a new property, which is intended to be their permanent home—a vital step toward stability and recovery. However, the property was completely unfurnished and the family urgently needed essential household items. The mother is receiving Universal Credit, but this does not stretch far enough to cover the cost of furnishing the home. The family received bedding and home furnishing items to help transform the empty property into a true home. These items were used to create a cosy, age-appropriate bedroom for XXX. The support has had a profound impact on both mother and child, creating a sense of safety and permanence. The improved living conditions have also opened opportunities for further engagement with support services and the local community, helping the family take meaningful steps toward rebuilding their lives.

Case Study 3: Supporting XXX's Emotional Well-being Through Meaningful Activities

XXX lives with his family. Recently, XXX has become increasingly secluded and is struggling to leave his home. XXX finds joy in cooking with his grandma and spending

time outdoors in the garden - activities that previously helped ease his anxiety and encouraged him to engage with others. However, due to his current circumstances, he has been unable to participate in these meaningful experiences.

Through the support fund, XXX was able to acquire cooking and baking equipment tailored to his interests. This empowered him to take the first steps toward rebuilding his confidence and reconnecting with his grandma in a way that felt safe and enjoyable. Cooking with his grandma has not only provided comfort but has also served as a gentle bridge to help him overcome the anxiety associated with leaving his home. This small but significant intervention has helped XXX begin a journey toward greater independence, emotional resilience, and social engagement.